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ISLAM

Engaging with Abraham and His Knife: Interpretation of Abraham's Sacrifice in the Muslim Tradition

Isra Yazicioglu

As it is in Christianity and Judaism, the story of Abraham's attempt at sacrificing his son is a scriptural story in Islam. In this essay, we shall first look closely at the Qur'anic version of the story and then discuss some of the ways in which the text has been interpreted in the Muslim tradition. Before we delve into our venture, two notes, or perhaps disclaimers, will be in order.

The first assumption that guides this study is to look at the Qur'anic story as a story in its own right, rather than as a story originating in the Bible or Judeo-Christian sources. To be sure, it is a fact that the Qur'an emerges as a text after the Bible, and the story is very similar to the biblical one. It would be neither desirable nor possible to forbid a historian try to do her historical work to investigate the ways in which the Judeo-Christian sources may have informed Muhammad's milieu.¹ Nevertheless, ultimate explanations of origin will always involve an existential decision, and thus, rather than settling origin claims, this essay is interested in the Qur'an's "self-perception" and the reception of a Qur'anic story by Muslim interpreters.² Throughout the essay, I treat the

1. To be sure, there is no neutral history and a historian's existential commitments will also shape his historical theories. For a good and pertinent example, see W. A. Bijlefeld, "Controversies around the Qur'anic Ibrahim Narrative and Its 'Orientalist' Interpretations," *The Muslim World* 72 (1982): 81–94.

2. Indeed, different implicit existential conceptions of "genuine revelatory" moments will often accompany the search for "origins" of a scriptural passage. Some place the spark of innovation on Mount Sinai, or rabbinic innovation, some with Jesus Christ, others in ancient Near Eastern creativity, while some others assume that sheer luck, mad human subconsciousness, and historical accidents are the origin

Qur'an as a separate unit in itself, and while acknowledging similarities with other traditions, I resist a hierarchical model that deems the Qur'an as always "derivative" of biblical and postbiblical literature.³

My second disclaimer is that this essay does not aim to be exhaustive or representative of all of the main responses to this Qur'anic story. Instead, it is a selective presentation to give a taste of the meaningful ways in which the interpretive tradition received this provocative and invocative story. In what follows, I shall first look at the presentation of Abraham in the Qur'an and then introduce the Qur'anic story of Abraham's attempt at sacrificing his son.

ABRAHAM IN THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an is a compilation of passages that the Prophet Muhammad claimed to have received from God through the mediation of the angel Gabriel. The purported narrator throughout the text is God, who is understood to be addressing humanity through the Prophet Muhammad. These passages, which were revealed to the Prophet over a period of about twenty-three years (610–632 CE), form a discourse that is quite unexpected for an ear attuned to biblical style. For it does not follow a particular chronology: unlike the Bible, the Qur'an does not start with a creation story and move along a trajectory of salvation history. Nor does it offer a biography of Muhammad's life or a story of his ministry, though allusions to them are present. Moreover, with the exception of Joseph story, the Qur'an does not contain extended narratives, either. While it mentions many of the figures that are also mentioned in the Bible, such as Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus, their stories are never told in one place. Instead, each of these figures appear and re-appear throughout the text; snippet stories about each are presented elliptically, and placed in an exhortational context. The story of Moses, for instance, is told in more than fifty different places in the Qur'an, each providing an excerpt or an episode of Moses' life and ministry, and they serve to illustrate central Qur'anic themes, such as the oneness of God and life after death.

of all. Keeping William C. Smith's advice, I shall instead try to reflect a phenomenological approach, that which does not take upon itself the final decision on the question of origin, and instead gives the outsiders a taste of an insider's encounter with the text.

3. Indeed, "scholars have habitually traced interpretive lines that assume that the putative hybrid, the 'Judeo-Christian,' is superior to Islam, that the Bible and post-biblical literatures are prior to the always derivative Qur'an and that the story trade between Jews, Christians and Muslims only ever went in one direction, *to*, the East from a (qualifiedly Eastern) proto-West." Yvonne Sherwood, "Binding–Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the 'Sacrifice' of Abraham's Beloved Son," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 4 (2004): 829.

One of the major claims of the Qur'an is that the Creator of the universe has spoken to humanity throughout time and across different lands. Starting with Adam and ending with Muhammad, countless prophets and messengers of God have been sent to disclose the meaning of life and the divine purpose to humanity (e.g., Q. 4:164; 40:78). Prophets and messengers are presented as exemplary human beings, including Abraham. In the Qur'an, Abraham is not the first monotheist; instead he follows the path of previous messengers who proclaimed the oneness of God, such as Noah. Nevertheless, he is highlighted as a crucial example of a monotheist and people are time and again called to follow the "creed of Abraham" (*millati ibrahīm*) (Q. 2:135; 2:130; 3:95; 6:161, etc.). Abraham is presented as an exemplary human being who opens himself up to divine guidance and receives it, and responds fully with gratitude and surrender to God. And God takes Abraham as his "friend" (*khalīl*): "Who could be better in religion than those who direct themselves wholly to God, do good and follow the religion of Abraham, who was true in faith? God took Abraham as a friend" (Q. 4:125).⁴ This title *khalīl* became an epithet for Abraham in the Muslim tradition, including Persian and Turkish literature.⁵

In the Qur'an, Abraham searches for God amidst his pagan society and questions the idol worship. He turns away from the worship of the passing by declaring "I do not love those that set" (Q. 6:76), a phrase that became a cornerstone in Islamic spirituality. Abraham is then guided by God to the path of "truth": the worship of the Eternal One. His public mission also starts early: as a youth, he engages his father (Q. 19:42–46) and people, trying to convince them out of their idolatry. The people in response throw him in fire, but he is saved from it by God (Q. 2:258; 6:80–81; 21:51–78; 26:70–89; 29:16–27; 37:83–98; 43:26–28). The Qur'an also alludes to Abraham's migration, with Lot, away from his people to a land that has been blessed, with no reference to the geographical site (Q. 21:71). His migration is more often termed as a "migration to God," emphasizing the spiritual motive behind the physical move (Q. 29:26; 37:99).

In the Qur'an, Abraham is also the recipient of a divine promise, and unlike the Hebrew Scriptures, and more like the New Testament, the emphasis here is on the spiritual legacy he is promised. God shall make Abraham a leader in faith

4. Unless otherwise noted, all the translations of the Qur'an are cited from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

5. Thus, for instance, in Turkish literature—similar to Arabic and Persian usage—Abraham is referred to as *Halilullah* (Friend of God), *Halilurrahman* (Friend of the Merciful), and *Halil-i Akdes* (Friend of the Exalted One). See also Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentary of Rashid al-Din Maybudi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 215–18.

(*imām*) for all people and this promise will extend to those of his progeny *only if* they follow Abraham's path of faith and submission (Q. 2:124). The Qur'an is unequivocal that physical descent from Abraham is of no value in itself. The descendants of Abraham have indeed been given Scripture and wisdom, "but some of them believed and some of them turned away" (Q. 4:54-55), and the former shall prosper and the latter will not.

Abraham's sons, Isaac and Ishmael, are mentioned much more briefly and often in the same breath as righteous messengers who called to the path of God (e.g. Q. 2:133, 136, 140; 3:84; 4:163; 14:39), and at other times separately (e.g. Q. 6:118; 12:38; 19:54). While the Qur'an recounts the good news of Isaac's birth to Abraham and Sarah twice, it does not refer explicitly to Hagar, nor to any tension between Sarah and Hagar. It is implied, however, that Abraham in time separates Ishmael and Hagar from Sarah, for he settles "some of [his] offspring" in a different place, in "a barren valley" (Q. 14:37), understood to be in "Becca" (Q. 3:96), an ancient reference to Mecca. It is on one of his visits to Mecca that Abraham builds with Ishmael a temple for worship of God, the precursor to today's Kaaba (Q. 2:127-128), which is the site of pilgrimage (*hajj*) in Islam. While the Kaaba was associated with Abraham in pre-Islamic Arab traditions, from a biblical perspective the association of Abraham and Ishmael with Mecca may come as a surprise.⁶

THE QUR'ANIC PASSAGE ON ABRAHAM'S ATTEMPT AT SACRIFICE

Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his son is narrated in Sura 37, right after the brief mention of how Abraham challenged idol worship among his people, and the angered interlocutors of Abraham decided to throw him into a blazing fire (Q. 37:83-98). The text alludes to Abraham being saved from the fire, his migration for God, and then moves right onto the sacrifice story:

They wanted to harm him, but We [God] humiliated them. He [Abraham] said, "I will go to my Lord: He is sure to guide me. Lord,

6. A Muslim commentator, Muhammad Asad, suggests a reconciliation: "At first glance, the Biblical statement (Genesis xii, 14) that it was 'in the wilderness of Beersheba' (i.e., in the southernmost tip of Palestine) that Abraham left Hagar and Ishmael would seem to conflict with the Qur'anic account. This seeming contradiction, however, disappears as soon as we remember that to the ancient, town-dwelling Hebrews the term 'wilderness of Beersheba' comprised all the desert regions south of Palestine, including the Hijaz." According to Asad, "this is by no means improbable if one bears in mind that for a camel-riding bedouin (and Abraham was certainly one) a journey of twenty or even thirty days has never been anything out of the ordinary." Asad, *Message of the Qur'an*, (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1984), 26n102 [in ref. to Q. 2:125.]

grant me a righteous son.” So We gave him the good news that he would have a patient son. When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said: “My son, I have seen myself sacrificing you in a dream. What do you think?” He said, “Father, do as you are commanded and, God willing, you will find me steadfast.” When they both submitted to God, and he had laid his son down on the side of his face, We called out to him, “Abraham, you have fulfilled the dream.” This is how We reward those who do good—it was a test to prove. We ransomed his son with a momentous sacrifice, and We let him be praised by succeeding generations. “Peace be upon Abraham!” This is how We reward those who do good: truly he was one of Our faithful servants. (Q. 37:99–111)

Perhaps the first striking feature of this passage is that it does not name the son involved in the sacrifice. As shall be discussed later, the question whether it was Ishmael or Isaac was debated in the exegetical tradition. As far as the Qur’an is concerned, the story has the same “punch line” regardless of who the son was, for both Ishmael and Isaac are honored in the Qur’an, and neither one is presented as having a more privileged connection to God than the other.

Another important feature of the story, which is again different from the biblical narrative, is the conversation between Abraham and his son, and the son’s explicit consent to the sacrifice. In fact, Abraham discloses to his son not only his intention but also his source of inspiration. In other words, he does not simply say to him, “God wants me to sacrifice you,” but rather that he sees in a dream that he is sacrificing him. Thus, his question to his son “what do you think?” could be interpreted both as consulting about sacrifice: “Shall I go ahead with God’s command?” as well as about the inference “is this dream a divine command?”

Next, the son and the father both surrender (*aslama*) to what they perceive to be the will of God. In that very moment of submission, Abraham is called and the very “fulfillment” (lit. “confirmation”) of the dream is announced. Before continuing to narrate what happens next, the text clarifies that this was all a “clear test” (*balāun mubin*) and that Abraham and the son are rewarded as doers of good.

The sacrifice of the son is replaced by a “momentous sacrifice,” which is again noteworthy in its lack of detail. Muslim commentators often understood the ransom to be sacrifice of a ram, as noted in the Genesis narrative. Also, a strong connection was made between this “momentous” ransom provided by God and the Festival of Sacrifice that Muslims celebrate in pilgrimage season

every year (Q. 22:26–37), in commemoration of Abraham’s legacy. We shall treat the sacrifice ritual later as a performative interpretation of the story.

INTERPRETATION OF ABRAHAM’S SACRIFICE IN THE MUSLIM TRADITION

The Qur’anic story of Abraham’s attempted sacrifice is significant for the Muslim tradition in that it involves one of the major examples of “submission” to God (*islām*), which lies at the heart of the religion endorsed in the Qur’an. (eg. Q. 2:132–33; 3:19, 67, 85; 22:78). The text is provocative and different interpreters engaged with it over the ages. I shall present my sampling of Muslim reception of the story as follows.

First, we shall look at how the story has been understood in the exegetical tradition (*tafsīr*), as it is displayed in some of the classical running commentaries on the Qur’an. Here, I would like to especially give a taste of a common tendency in classical exegesis, as well as in the popular stories about prophets (*qisās al anbiya* literature), which John Renard names as “historical prophetology.” This is an “approach [that is] largely interested in the story line and in gathering the myriad anecdotal details that render a story, credible, engaging and true-to-life, with a generous enough sprinkling of the fantastic to make it marvelous.”⁷

To be sure, classical exegesis goes beyond historical prophetology in seeking to understand the implications of the sacred text. Thus, in the second part, we look at the question of the counter-intuitiveness of the divine command as it is discussed by the famous theologian-exegete, Fakhr al-dīn al-Rāzī. We shall also note a famous mystic’s disagreement with Rāzī’s interpretation.

Third, we shall discuss examples of how Muslim interpreters took this story as edifying for them, taking the Qur’anic notion that the prophets’ conduct is exemplary for believers (e.g. Q. 33:21; 60:4–6). They engaged with the question of how to apply the story to a believer’s life. Clearly, there was a clear consensus throughout—which was made very explicit, for instance, by the Muslim scholar, Ibn Hazm—that no Muslim should ever even think of offering her child as a sacrifice to God. What was, then, the lesson of this story? We shall see two crucial ways in which the tradition received the story as teaching a profound lesson.

7. John Renard, *All the King’s Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 3.

*HISTORICIZING AND DRAMATIZING: THE SACRIFICE STORY IN HISTORICAL
PROPHETOLOGY*

Many of Muhammad's earliest opponents dismissed the Qur'an as "fables of the ancients," that is, as stories assembled from older sources and falsely presented as God's words (see Q. 6:25; 8:31; 9:105; 16:24). In contrast, both the early and later commentators of the Qur'an regarded the similarity between the Qur'an and pre-Qur'anic sources as a badge of honor.⁸ For they affirmed the Qur'anic claim that it was a fresh revelation from God "confirming what has been sent down before," and regarded the continuities across the texts as "vertical." That is, the same God, who had spoken earlier through Torah and the Gospels, was now speaking through Muhammad. Thus, the similarities between the Qur'an and previous traditions were interpreted as the consistency of the divine speaker, while the divergence of the Qur'an from the previous scriptures was interpreted as divine clarifications as to what has been lost or misunderstood over time by previous communities. (Needless to say, what constituted "divergence" from the Qur'an was open to interpretation.) Given these assumptions, it is not surprising that from early on Muslims were interested in how other communities related to the Qur'anic stories, willing to adopt information from the Bible and other sources, albeit with a grain of salt.

In addition to being receptive to seeing similarities between the Qur'an and sacred traditions of other communities, some Muslim exegetes also took advantage of the fact that the Qur'anic story telling—if it can be called as such—was very elliptical and succinct. Thus, they were often excited about "filling in" the details of a very succinct Qur'anic story from Judeo-Christian sources.

Popular storytelling about prophets, the *qisās al anbiya* tradition, was even more enthusiastic than classical Qur'anic exegetes in telling the lives of Qur'anic prophets in rich detail, placed within a universal history of struggle between good and evil.⁹ These traditions incorporated biblical, rabbinic, and Christian motifs, as well as other oral sources, and probably also a good deal of imagination. In what follows, we shall first look at some of the famous stories related in Muslim circles around this Qur'anic passage.

THE SON: ISAAC OR ISHMAEL?

As noted earlier, the Qur'anic narrative does not clarify who the son is. Earlier exegetical sources tend to identify the "to-be sacrificed son" (*al-dhabīḥ*) as Isaac, and later interpreters incline more toward Ishmael, especially after the tenth

8. Ibid., 1.

9. See *ibid.*, 3–4.

century.¹⁰ Today, most ordinary Muslims would think that the Qur'anic text actually mentions Ishmael as the son.

For those who identified Isaac as the intended sacrifice, the fact that the Torah/Old Testament identified the sacrificial son as Isaac was a crucial evidence. For those who identified it as Ishmael, the biblical reference was not as trustworthy at this point. For them, biblical reference to Isaac being Abraham's "only son" in the binding story was a problem, for clearly there was no time that Isaac was the only son, and these exegetes felt they should be more cautious toward the biblical version.

Different ways of construing when the story took place also led to different identifications of who the son was.¹¹ These kinds of arguments from chronology of events are not decisive since the Qur'an is not chronological in its style. A textual clue for identifying the unnamed son "gifted" to Abraham (Q. 37:101) as Isaac was that all the other references to the good news of a son mentioned in the Qur'an referred to Isaac. Based on the same references, others argued that the unnamed son must have been Ishmael for the couple is promised the good news of Isaac "and after him Jacob" (Q. 11:71). Thus, if Abraham was already given the good news of Isaac's progeny, how could then he be commanded to slaughter Isaac? This must have been a strong argument. What also tilted the balance toward Ishmael was his connection to the Kaaba and pilgrimage rituals, which also included animal sacrifice that came to be understood as a commemoration of Abraham's attempt at sacrificing his son.

As Firestone suggests, the identification of Ishmael as the son involved in the sacrifice may have become popular also as part of Jewish-Muslim polemic. Indeed, some of the Muslim commentators may have been reacting to the

10. Rueven Firestone, in his detailed study of narrations around the Qur'anic story of sacrifice, notes the tenth century to be the turning point for the opinions shifting from Isaac to Ishmael. See *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 150–51. Even after the tenth century, the exegetical sources did not ever erase the silence of the text. Hence, for instance, in sixteenth century, al-Suyuti records different accounts that highlight either Isaac or Ishmael as the intended sacrifice. Interestingly, some Muslim interpreters, such as Rumi (d.1273) and Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), refer to *both* Ishmael and Isaac as the son involved in the event. Similarly, some contemporary commentaries still cite the evidences for both sides, and eventually leave the identity of the son undecided, noting the scholarly disagreement over the subject.

11. For instance, some said the event must have happened after Abraham migrated to Damascus (migration alluded to in v. 101), and therefore it must be Isaac. Some others disagreed, saying that since the text mentions the good news of Isaac right after the story of sacrifice (v. 112), the son involved must have been Ishmael. For a summary of this debate on the identification of the unnamed son by a classical commentator, see Fakr al-din al-Razi, *Tafsir al-Kabir* (Egypt: al-Matba'ah al-Bahiyah al-Misriya, n.d.), 26:153ff.

popular Jewish view of the exclusion of Ishmael from the covenant, from whom Muhammad is believed to have descended. Moreover, some Muslims even saw in the identification of Ishmael as the *dhabīḥ* (“the one to be sacrificed”) a sign of God’s preference of Arabs over Jews. The disagreement over the identification of the son also was used in Persian-Arab polemics, since the former traced their lineage to Isaac.¹²

Within the Qur’anic view, however, there is a clear resistance to such boasts over lineage, and the concept of being a Muslim is clearly not predicated on one’s bloodline or a particular historical community. In fact, not only are Ishmael and Isaac both spoken of highly in the Qur’an, but both are also regarded as part of the “believing community” that the reader is invited to join (e.g., Q. 2:132–36). Moreover, as noted earlier, the Qur’an is very clear that divine blessing is not conditioned upon lineage. Perhaps the silence of the Qur’an regarding the identity of the son is a way of protecting the lesson of the story from being lost in inter-communal competition.

ABRAHAM’S DREAM

In the Qur’anic passage it is clear that both Abraham and his son take the dream as a divine command. Classical commentators such as al-Tabari (d. 923), Zamakhshari (d. 1144), and al-Tabarsi (d. 1154) narrate a story according to which, when Abraham was given the good news of a son (in this version, Isaac), he was so excited that he vowed to sacrifice it to God once he was born:

Gabriel said to Sarah, “I am giving you the good news of a son named Isaac, and after Isaac, Jacob.” She slapped her forehead in surprise. . . . Sarah said to Gabriel: “What is a sign of this?” He took a dry twig in his hand and bent it between his fingers. It quivered and turned green. Then Abraham said, “He will therefore be a sacrifice to God!”¹³

Then Abraham forgot his vow, and the dream that he saw years later was a divine reminder of this vow. In a view ascribed to Imam Abu Hanifa (d. 767), this story thus explains why a sacrifice was still necessary, even after it was announced that Abraham fulfilled the vision, for he had to also offer an expiation of his vow.¹⁴ This additional story may have also lessened the

12. W. Montgomery Watt, “Ishāk,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs, (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

13. Tabari on the authority of al-Suddi, cited in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, 108–9.

uneasiness of the divine command by putting the responsibility on Abraham's shoulders: it was Abraham's own vow that made him liable for such a test.

THE "FLESHING" OUT OF THE EMOTIONS

It is noteworthy that many of these additional stories dwell on the emotions of the son and the father. In one account, the son tells his father, "father, bind me tight lest my blood spatter on you," or "father, bind me tightly lest I lead you astray."¹⁵ In other accounts, the son and the father are both crying right before the sacrifice; they cry so much that the soil on which Ishmael/Isaac is lying gets soaked. In some versions, the son makes references to his mother, asking the father to pass his garment and convey his greetings to her.¹⁶ The son also encourages Abraham to go ahead with the sacrifice even if he trembles and tries inadvertently to resist:

Do not sacrifice me while looking at my face lest you feel compassion for me and fail to take my life. And if I regret [my decision] and shrink [from the deed] and struggle against you, [then fear not]. But tie my hands to my neck then place my face upon the ground.¹⁷

There is also the crucial temptation prelude noted in different traditional sources, according to which Abraham, Ishmael/Isaac and Hagar/Sarah are tempted by Satan one by one. Thus, for instance, Satan comes to the mother and informs her of what Abraham is intending to do with her son, and the mother first does not believe: "Certainly not! He is even more compassionate toward him than I!" She then asks why would he ever consider to do such a thing, and when Satan says because of God's command, she responds, "If God commanded that of him, then he should do it!" Under similar provocation, the son gives a similar response to Satan.¹⁸ Satan also approaches Abraham in the form of an old man and says, "Heaven forbid! You will sacrifice an innocent boy?" When Abraham informs that it is God's command, the old man

14. Elmalili Hamdi M. Yazir, *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili*, ed. I. Karacam, E. Isik, N. Bolelli, A. Yucel (Yenibosna, Ist: Feza Yay, 1992) 6:444.

15. Suyuti, *Durr*, 5, 284, lines 5ff., cited in Norman Calder, "From Midrash to Scripture: The Sacrifice of Abraham in Early Islamic Tradition," in *Interpretation and Jurisprudence in Medieval Islam*, ed. Jawid Mojaddedi and Andrew Rippin (London: Ashgate, 2006), 382.

16. Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, 117–19.

17. Attributed to Mujahid (119/722) in Suyuti, *Durr*, 5, 280, lines 20ff., cited in Calder, "From Midrash to Scripture," 390.

18. Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, 111–12.

insists that it must have been a Satanic suggestion. When the old man sees that Abraham is set on the sacrifice, he pleads, “O Abraham, you are a leader whom people follow. If you sacrifice him, then [all the] people will sacrifice their children!”¹⁹ The old man’s arguments sound very reasonable, indeed.

Such stories not only help the reader visualize the event told in the Qur’an and dwell in that very challenging moment of sacrifice, but also ease the emotional and theological challenges in reading the story. By *acknowledging* all the fears and anxieties that can be invoked by such an unusual command, these stories also seem to *release* them.²⁰ It seems to me that these tales are in effect communicating to the reader, “yes, the command seems appalling (killing an innocent boy!), very painful to carry out (both the father and the son are crying!), or even bordering on setting a dangerous precedent (what if human sacrifice becomes a tradition!), but it was none of these. It was God’s command, and there was a point to it *other* than all these scary ones.”

WAS THE SACRIFICE A DIVINE COMMAND?

One might argue, however, that in the Qur’anic narrative it is not entirely clear that the sacrifice of the son was indeed a divine command. Classical exegetes often note that the dreams of prophets are not like ordinary dreams; they are truthful dreams, and a channel of God’s revelation. As a widely read sixteenth-century “digest” commentary, Jalalayn *tafsir*, puts it, “the visions of prophets are [always] true and their actions are [inspired] by the command of God, exalted be He.”²¹ It was also noted that Abraham saw the dream three nights in a row, which convinced him that it was not a satanic suggestion but instead a truthful dream.

As these explanations strengthened the notion that it was indeed a divine command, they also subtly challenged it to some extent. For, as the famous medieval commentator Fakhr al-din al-Razi (d. 1209) put it, if it were entirely clear to Abraham that a prophet’s dream equals a genuine revelation, why would Abraham think about it after the first night? Why would he consult with his son and proceed only after the son supports his interpretation? And yet if it

19. Ibid., 112.

20. As Sherwood notes, these stories also reveal that the traditional readers noticed what we *moderns* notice: the incredible demand put on the father and the son, and the counter-intuitiveness of the divine command. Thus, they challenge the assumption that only through the Enlightenment that the notions of humanness and rationality are introduced to religion (Sherwood, “Binding–Unbinding,” 855).

21. Jalal al-din al-Mahalli and Jalal al-din al-Suyuti, *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, ed. ‘Abd Allah Rabī Mahmud (Lebanon: Maktaba Lubnan, 1998) 594. The English translation is by Feras Hamza, from www.altafsir.org.

was a mere dream, then how is it possible that a prophet, who is an exemplary individual for all believers, tries to sacrifice his son based on a mere dream? Razi's solution is to suggest a combination: perhaps the dream he saw was also confirmed by an additional clear revelation.²²

Razi also raises the question whether it is possible to talk about God as having commanded something, and then, before the command was carried out, having abrogated that command. For Razi, the answer is in the positive: it is quite possible that God first commands the sacrifice of the son, and then abrogates that command by stopping Abraham from doing it.²³ Razi presents the issue as pertaining to jurisprudence (*usūl al-fiqh*), the method of interpreting the divine commands, but it also reveals Razi's theological conviction that God may command something without actually wishing that thing to happen. After all, Razi was an Asharite theologian.

The relation of human actions to God's will and power was the topic of the earliest controversy in Muslim history and for the Asharite position—which became the mainstream opinion by eleventh century—the distinction between God's will and God's approval was a crucial one. The idea was that nothing, including human actions, happened without God's will, which was to be distinguished from the fact that God willed the consequences of bad human choices to happen without being “pleased” with them. As was crystallized in the work of a later classical theologian, al-Nasafi, (d. 1309), the conclusion was that

God is the creator of all the actions of His creatures whether of Unbelief or of Belief, of obedience or disobedience. And they are all of them *by His Will* and Desire, by His judgment, by His ruling, and by His decreeing. His creatures have actions of *choice* for which they are rewarded or punished. *And the good in these is by the good pleasure of God, the vile in them is not by His good pleasure.*²⁴

In other words, people make choices and God willingly creates the results of those choices. Hence, nothing happens without God's will and power, and yet humans also have responsibility for the bad results because they are the ones who make choices. (To offer a modern analogy, a publisher may publish an author's article without agreeing with all that is expressed therein. Without the

22. Razi, *Tafsir al-Kabir*, 153.

23. Razi, *Tafsir al-Kabir*, 155.

24. Sad al-Din Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam: Sad al-Din al-Taftazani on the Creed of Najm al-Din al-Nasafi*, intro. and trans. E. E. Elder (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 80 (italics and emphasis added).

publisher's consent and power, not a single word will be published, and yet that does not mean the publisher is "pleased" with every single word in the article.) Asharites argued that when God creates an unjust act of a human being upon the person's choice, God does not become unjust because he creates the injustice *for* that person *as* his/her injustice, not as God's injustice.²⁵ To be sure, God is responsible in the larger scheme of things, for having allowed humans choice. Yet, in the larger scheme, there is no real ugliness or injustice since God has given freedom of choice to human beings for an overall wise and good purpose.²⁶ This good purpose is to provide room for humans to develop their capacities, to bring out their good qualities such as their sense of justice, courage, and creativity, and thereby to manifest God's beautiful qualities, such as his wisdom, mercy, justice, and majesty, a point that was especially central to Sufi thought.

An implication of the Asharite position on the issue for the sacrifice story is that since God's will and approval are not the same thing, God may have commanded the sacrifice of the son without approving such human sacrifice. Razi argues that a command may have a purpose other than being carried out. He offers an analogy to illustrate his point: think of a servant and a master—the master can assign to the servant a very difficult task to be carried out in a few days. Even as he is commanding the task, the master's aim may be to simply train the servant in obedience, and once the servant displays the willingness to do it, the master can cancel the task.²⁷

Razi also records dissent from this view. He reports that Mutazilites, who were the opponents of Asharites, along with many Shafis and Hanafis, disagreed with the possibility of God commanding something and then abrogating it. Hence, they suggested that Abraham was actually never commanded to carry out such a sacrifice; there was no such command in the first place that was being abrogated in a later stage. According to this view, Abraham was only commanded with making preparations for sacrifice and showing submission to God's will, and being ready to follow the command to

25. Al-Ash'ari (d. 936), the founder of the Asharite School, argues that while in regard to human beings whoever wills or performs folly is foolish, this rule does not necessarily apply to God. In fact, according to al-Ash'ari it does not even apply to all humans, either. As an example, al-Ash'ari brings the case of Joseph in the Qur'an, who, in the face of insistent temptation for adultery, said that he preferred prison to that sin. Here, al-Ash'ari notes that although Joseph willed a folly to take place (i.e., to be innocently put in prison as he was threatened) he was not himself unjust for willing such injustice, because he willed as the injustice of another. Abu'l Hasan Ali Ibn Ismail al-Ash'ari, *al-Ibana 'an Usul al-diyana*, intro. and trans. Walter C. Klein (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society), 104.

26. Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, 87.

27. Ibid., 157.

sacrifice *if* it was given. Razi retorts back by saying that if the sacrifice command was not ever given, then why was a ransom provided for the son?²⁸

What is also at stake here is another major controversy of Islamic theology: whether God could command something that is detestable (*qabīh*) according to human criteria. The Mutazilite view, which eventually became marginalized in the majority (Sunni) discourse, argued that things and actions have a good or bad essence to them, which are transparent to human reason, and that God's commands are congruent with those essences. That is, God prohibits something because it *is* evil, and he commands something because it *is* good, and human reason can witness to that. Hence, Abraham being commanded with something that is otherwise a sin does not make sense for Mutazilites. After all, if the sacrifice of the son is not evil, then why does God stop Abraham from doing it, and if it is indeed evil, then was God ignorantly commanding something evil?²⁹ On the other hand, what became the Sunni orthodoxy insisted that good and bad were contextual and relative, and *strictly speaking* God's actions were not compelled by our human considerations of good and evil.³⁰ Thus, Razi says that to judge the divine command on the basis of what seems good or evil to human reason is invalid. To be sure, he is willing to grant the “ugliness” of child sacrifice cited by Mutazilites. He argues, however, that it does not necessarily make the command an evil command. For the goodness of the command is not always determined by what the command is but at times is determined by its context and purpose. Hence, God commanded the sacrifice of the son for a different purpose, not for it to be undertaken, but for the resolve of Abraham to manifest.³¹

Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), the famous Muslim mystic, also had an interesting position on whether Abraham was ordered by God to sacrifice his son. Ibn 'Arabi has had an enormous influence on Muslim spirituality and thought, which earned him the title of the Greatest Master, *Shaykh al-Akbar*. According to him, each messenger figure embodies a crucial stage in the spiritual journey toward God. The prophets are models to all believers in that

28. Ibid., 155.

29. Ibid., 157.

30. I would like to stress the “strictly speaking” qualifier here, since the traditional Muslim controversy over whether God was bound by that which binds our sense of morality has been overstated to some extent in current Western scholarship, giving the misleading impression that the “arbitrary” nature of God's will has won over God's wisdom in Sunni theology. Yet Sunni theologians did not ever reject the notion of compatibility of God's commands with human nature (*fiṭra*), or God's wisdom in giving particular guidelines for human life, even as they affirmed the unboundedness of God's will.

31. Razi, 155.

their “voyages are bridges and passageways constructed so that we might cross over them toward our own essences and our own beings.”³²

According to Ibn ‘Arabi, Abraham represents the station of “rapturous love” in the journey toward God.³³ The epithet friend [*khalīl*] of God was given to Abraham because he was “penetrated” [*khallala*] by a “rapturous love by which the lover is wholly permeated by the beloved.”³⁴ Even in this high station, Abraham had more to learn. In regard to Abraham’s dream regarding the sacrifice, Ibn ‘Arabi notes that Abraham mistakenly took the dream at face value.³⁵ To be sure, most of the things that prophets observe in the realm of dream are necessarily true, for they come from the “World of Absolute Image-Exemplars” (*mithāl al-mutlaq*), which has a correspondence with reality that is outside the plane of Imagination.³⁶ Now, Abraham thought that the dream he saw about sacrificing his son was such a one, but actually it was the kind of a vision that did not directly correspond to reality, a vision that had to be interpreted to apply to reality. According to Ibn ‘Arabi, interpretation means to connect the apparent form to something beyond the form, and this was what was called for in the case of Abraham’s dream:³⁷

The state of sleep is the plane of Imagination and Abraham did not interpret [what he saw], for it was a ram that appeared in the form of Abraham’s son in the dream, while Abraham believed what he saw [at face value]. So his Lord rescued his son from Abraham’s misapprehension by the Great Sacrifice [of the ram] which was the

32. Ibn ‘Arabi, *Kitāb al-isfār ‘an natāij al-asfār* [Book of the Unveiling of the Effects of the Voyage], *Le Dévoilement des Effets du Voyage*, Arabic text ed., intro. and trans. D. Gril (Combas, 1994), §45, cited in Michel Chodkiewicz, “The Endless Voyage” <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/endlessvoyage.html>.

33. Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, intro. and trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 91ff.

34. Austin, “Introductory Note,” in *ibid.*, 90.

35. It is interesting that elsewhere, in *Futūhāt*, Ibn ‘Arabi regards this test as a test Abraham had to go through to focus his yearning squarely on God, and not anything else. (*Fut.*, 2, 10, cited in Chodkiewicz, “The Endless Voyage,” who also notes that while Ibn ‘Arabi includes this discussion under his chapter on Isaac, in his *Futūhāt* he refers to Ishmael as the son involved in the sacrifice.)

36. William C. Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabi’s Own Summary of the *Fusus*: ‘The Imprint of the Bezels of the Wisdom,’” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 1 (1982): 17, <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articlespdf/naqshalfusus.pdf>. (For Ibn ‘Arabi, the term “Imagination” has a special connotation that is different from what we mean by “imagination” in everyday usage, hence its capitalization by the translator.)

37. Ibn ‘Arabi, *Bezels*, 99.

true expression of his vision with God, of which Abraham was unaware.³⁸

Ibn ‘Arabi reads God’s address to Abraham stopping him from sacrifice in Q. 37:104–105 [*ya Ibrahim qad saddaqa al-ru’yā*] in the sense of, “O Abraham, you *believed* your dream” instead of “O Abraham, you *fulfilled* your dream.” Ibn ‘Arabi’s reading actually offers a more literal reading of the verb *saddaqa* mentioned in the verse. He further supports it by pointing out how God does *not* say to Abraham, “you were right in what you believed.”³⁹ Hence, the “ransom” provided by God was ransom only from Abraham’s perspective; in reality it was the real sacrifice intended by God. The case of Abraham the Friend of God becomes a teaching moment for all believers, showing that “in respect of any vision we may have of the Reality *in a form unacceptable to the reason* . . . we must interpret that form in accordance with a doctrinal concept of Reality, either from the standpoint of the recipient of the vision or the [cosmic] context [of the vision] or both.”⁴⁰ It is interesting how Ibn ‘Arabi both affirms the role of reason in interpretation and qualifies that affirmation. Reason is to be the arbiter of what is real, but it must at the same time conform to a proper vision of “Reality.”

“IT WAS CLEARLY A TEST”: THE STORY AS A CLEAR LESSON

Even though Razi, his opponents, and Ibn ‘Arabi understood Abraham’s dream differently, they all responded to the Qur’anic statement that what Abraham went through was a *clear* test. Indeed, the very plain sense of the Qur’anic story seems to have oriented Muslim readers toward attending to the lesson of the story. The emphasis on the lesson side of the story is brought out very well by Ibn Hazm, an eleventh-century Spanish Muslim scholar (d. 1064). Interestingly, Ibn Hazm’s comment on Abraham’s attempted sacrifice is found within his discussion of whether women could be prophets. In defense of women’s prophethood, Ibn Hazm first defines prophethood as getting a direct and clear message from God, a message that is *qualitatively* different from an inspiration, thought, dream, or feeling that normal people can experience. To show that women did have such encounters, Ibn Hazm cites the Qur’anic references to Sarah, Mary, and the mother of Moses. In order to emphasize the seriousness and qualitative difference of such revelatory experience, he analyzes

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 109 (italics added).

the case of the latter. He notes that Moses' mother received not only a divine promise but also an instruction: she is instructed by God to put her baby in a chest and leave it in the river (Q. 20:39; 28:7). According to Ibn Hazm, if she was *not* a prophet who received a genuine revelation, and instead she threw her baby into the river because of a dream she saw or because of a feeling she had, she would be "committing an act of extreme insanity and a heinous crime." To emphasize the distinction between prophets and others, he says: "*if any of us* did such a thing, it would be an extreme transgression (*ghaya al-fisq*) or an extreme case of insanity," which would require being placed in "a mental institution (*bimaristan*)."⁴¹ Similarly, Ibn Hazm notes that Abraham's attempt at sacrificing his son, if it is taken out of its prophetic context, would not make any sense whatsoever. If Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son because of "a mere dream," or "a doubt that came to him," *he* and "*anyone who is not a prophet*," would be "an extreme transgressor or an extremely crazy person (*majnunan fi ghayati al-junūn*)."⁴² Thus, the situation of the prophets is exceptional and the exact same act under all other circumstances would be insanity.

That the Muslim tradition—similar to Christianity and Judaism—categorically prohibits human sacrifice is relevant to Ibn Hazm's insistence that in the absence of an exceptional situation of prophecy, the attempt of sacrifice would be simply insane or absolutely reprehensible. Thus, the Qur'anic story is to be read within the confines, or rather the *horizon*, of an established ethical framework: since sacrificing a human being as an offering to God is *out of question* in the "sacred law" (*shari'a*), the story has to be received as an instruction about something else. In the next section, we shall look at two examples of how the sacrifice story was read as "something else," that is, a lesson in spiritual formation. In the writings of the famous spiritual master Rumi, as well as the annual performance of pilgrimage rites, we see how a profound attitude of submission was understood to be the lesson of the Qur'anic story.

SACRIFICE STORY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Jalal ad-Din Rumi (d.1273) was another towering figure in the Muslim tradition, whose works enjoyed popularity by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Unlike his contemporary Ibn 'Arabi, who wrote in an abstract and dense style, Rumi wrote more in everyday language, incorporating different parables and stories from everyday life. According to Rumi, the Qur'an's essential message

41. Abu Muhammad 'Ali bin Ahmad Ibn Hazm, *al-Fasl fi al-milal wa al-ahwai fi al-nihal*, ed. M. I. Nasr and A. 'Umayra (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1982), 5:120 (italics added).

42. Ibid., 121 (italics added).

is to show how the world is a mirror revealing the Creator, who constantly arranges and maintains the whole universe every moment. Life is a journey to God, and God speaks to a human being within her context. Divine love calls each soul back to himself. Each soul knows and loves the source of all beauty, the Divine, and yet each person needs to go through a conscious process so as to discover that hidden yearning within himself. Thus, the references to cleansing of the soul and maturing through the “heat” of divine love are frequent motifs in Rumi’s work.

Rumi’s reference to the sacrifice story comes in the midst of his famous parable about a chickpea.⁴³ The chickpea, boiling on the stove, starts jumping around in the cooking pot, and screams to be taken out. It complains to the housewife who put it there, asking her why she is doing this to it; if she cared enough to buy it from the market, why is she now throwing it to fire? The housewife in response pushes the chickpea back into the pot with her spoon, saying, “Boil nicely and don’t jump away from one who makes fire. I do not boil you because you are hateful to me: nay, it is that you may get taste and savor.”

Alternatively, she tries to convince the chickpea to be generous. She exhorts it to think of the pain and difficulty of the guest and to be generous to the guest. Just as it received generosity in the spring, and was nourished in the fields, now is the chickpea’s turn to be generous. One should be generous to the guest, so that the guest will leave happily and go back with a good report to the king who has sent that guest.⁴⁴

The conversation between the chickpea boiling in the pot and the lady of the house goes on, as she tries to convince the chickpea to receive the cooking process as a kind opportunity rather than a curse, as a result of being loved rather than being despised. Their conversation is glossed by Rumi as a metaphor for the relationship between the Merciful Creator and the human being who goes through troubles and challenges. Rumi exhorts the reader to see all that befalls one as meaningful, being sent for a wise and merciful purpose, to transform the self for the better. It is normal that the soul first sees many events as bitter, and wants to escape, but in reality they are essential for its transformation for the better. Elsewhere, Rumi notes that the difficulties in life are painful to the person who is not conscious that God’s mercy is unbounded and who resists

43. Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, trans. and comm. R. A. Nicholson (Cambridge: E.J. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1930), 4:4160ff. In place of a page number, the references to *Mathnawi* are cited with the book plus verse number within the text, as indicated in the Nicholson edition. All references to *Mathnawi* will be cited in this form, and unless otherwise noted the translation cited is from Nicholson.

44. Ibid.

change for the better. For Rumi, the Qur'anic prophets are great examples of being receptive to growth and transformation, and they display the wisdom of perceiving God's mercy even at the face of most difficult events.

The wise man is as a guest-house, and he admits all the thoughts that occur to him, whether of joy or of sorrow, with the same welcome, knowing that, like *Abraham*, he may entertain angels unawares. Let grief as well as joy lodge in the heart, for grief is sent for our benefit as well as joy. Endure woe patiently, like *Joseph* and *Job*, and regard it as a blessing, saying with Solomon, "Stir me up, O Lord, to be thankful for Thy favor which Thou hast showed upon me! [Q.27:19]"⁴⁵

For Rumi, the story of Abraham's attempt at sacrificing his son—whom he often refers to as Ishmael and occasionally as Isaac—is yet another good example of trusting the wisdom and mercy behind everything, and submitting to the One. Thus, in his parable of the chickpea, the housewife says: "O chickpea! I am *Khalil* [Abraham], and you are my son, lay your head before the knife, for, I see in my dream that I am sacrificing you." (3:4174) Like Ishmael, one need not worry or be afraid before the knife of "calamity," which is a blessing in disguise sent by God. And what is to be slaughtered by such calamities is *not* the real head, but that which blocks one from God, while the "real head," cannot be ever severed, nor can it die. (3:4175–76)

For Rumi, therefore, the story of submission of Abraham and his son before that apparently painful divine command serves as a clear reminder that God is the one whose love and power can be trusted unconditionally. And, therefore, the story can be translated to everyday life as a willingness to see even the most unexpected event as being commissioned by the One who is both loving and majestic. The binding of Abraham's son is the manifestation of this crucial willingness to leave a forgetful and confused attitude toward life and oneself. The point is to be wakeful to the divine wisdom and mercy that runs the world, which in turn makes submission to God possible. Rumi emphasizes that God's eternal wish from the believer is *not* that his head be severed, rather that he *submit* to God, and thus, he exhorts: "[O Muslim!] do seek to [genuinely] submit to Him!" (3:4175).

45. This translation is from E.H. Whinfield's abridged translation of 5: 3676–3 in *Masnawi i Ma'navi: The Spiritual Couplets* (London: Trübner, 1887), reprinted as *Teachings of Rumi* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), 267–68. Cf. Nicholson's.

For Rumi, a meditation on *who* God is (Merciful? Powerful? Wise?) is essential for surrender to God. Thus another very interesting commentary by Rumi on the binding of Ishmael/Isaac comes after a complex parable in the *Mathnawi*. The parable has its turns and twists, but it is basically about a great king who falls in love with a handmaiden, buys her, and brings her to his palace, only to see her fall sick. The king consults all kinds of physicians, but to no avail. Finally, he cries out to God, and God in response sends a special physician to his aid. The heavenly physician diagnoses that the woman is in love with a goldsmith in Samarkand. The man is brought from there and she is united with him. She heals and after six months of her union, there comes an apparently ruthless procedure to turn her love from the man to the king. The physician gives a medicine to the man, which causes him to lose beauty and strength gradually, till the maiden starts disliking him. The man eventually dies, and then the maiden is united to the king (1.35-220).

The story is again metaphorical, the sick lady representing the human soul, and the king the Divine (1. 220-245). God is in love with the human being, but the human being is in love with the passing passions of life, and like the king in the parable, God uses apparently ruthless measures to wean the soul from the love of the finite and to awaken in her the love of the eternal. According to Rumi, the measures the king uses may at times seem unjust or ruthless, but only a shallow person would really deem them as such, just like only a child would think that a healing operation is evil. While the child at the doctor cries with pain, the mother who takes her to the physician will be glad at heart. (2:244) Similarly, God's command to Abraham to slay his son seems cruel, but in reality it is only to benefit Abraham and his son by weaning them from their confused attachments. God is someone who "takes a half life and gives a hundred lives (in exchange): he gives that which enters not into your imagination" (2:246).

Here, Rumi connects the sacrifice story with another story in the Qur'an, that of the encounter between Moses and Khidr. The episode of Moses and Khidr narrated in Sura 18 (vv. 60-82) is unique in the Qur'an in that Moses has a divinely arranged appointment with a mysterious "servant of God," who takes him "behind the scenes," with the condition that he will not ask about anything until he gives an explanation. Moses promises to be patient, but he finds it very difficult to remain silent throughout the journey. They first get onto a boat and Khidr makes a hole in it. Moses protests, and rebukes him for endangering the life of the people in the ship. Khidr reminds him of his promise and Moses apologizes and asks for another chance. Next, Khidr does a favor to a people who were mean to them, which Moses does not find wise, and yet is reminded once again of his promise. Finally, Khidr kills a young boy,

and Moses expresses his shock at it and the man announces that he and Moses cannot continue together any longer. Before they part ways, Khidr gives an explanation of how each of his apparently shocking acts actually served for an imminent benefit. For instance, he explains that “the boat belonged to some needy people who made their living from the sea and I damaged it because I knew that coming after them was a king who was seizing every [serviceable] boat by force” (Q. 18:79). Khidr says that he did not do any of these of his own accord; he was simply carrying out God’s orders (Q. 18:72).

For Rumi, just as Moses, despite his prophetic light, did not have the right to judge Khidr’s actions, the reader should also abstain from hastily judging Abraham’s willingness to slay his son (2:235–6). For one should give due attention to *who* issued such a command; a command given with impure intentions and limited vision is not the same as the one given by the Absolute Mercy (2:243). If it is the former who is commanding it, it is simply an ugly plot. In contrast, if it is the Life-Giver speaking, then the situation is completely different. Hence, Rumi calls the believer to lay his head like Ishmael before Abraham: “Gladly and laughingly give up your soul before his dagger, in order that your soul may remain laughing unto eternity, like the pure soul of Ahmad [Muhammad] with the One [God]” (2:228).

Rumi’s association of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son with the Qur’anic story of Moses and Khidr opens up a very insightful interpretation of the sacrifice story. For it is clear that Moses’ encounter with Khidr gives him a peek *behind* the scenes, but *not* a permission to change the guidelines for acting “on the scene,” in everyday life. That is, the sacred law given to believers through Moses does not change because of Moses’ encounter with Khidr. Moses does not come out of this encounter and announce that sometimes vandalism is good, or murder of a child is acceptable at certain times. Rather, what Moses has gained through this encounter is a deeper appreciation of the wisdom of events beyond human control. Connecting the Moses-Khidr narrative with Abraham’s sacrifice, Rumi insightfully implies that just as Muslim tradition does not read the Khidr story as a legal text, the sacrifice story is also not to be read as such. Hence, the question whether the binding story justifies killing an innocent is simply out of question. Rather the text is about ushering a renewed sense of who God is and surrendering to God.

Rumi’s reading of the sacrifice story as a story of submission is not unique in the Muslim tradition. What is remarkable, however, is that he fleshes out what that surrender may look like in everyday life as an *active* response to life situations. Submission to God in the face of calamity is not simply acquiescence to it; rather, it is turning the calamity into an opportunity to grow. Thus Rumi’s

understanding of submission to God cultivates an attitude that is the opposite of victim mentality, which gives up agency in the face of difficulty. In this interpretation, Ishmael/Isaac is *not* a victim, nor is the wise person who knows God. In sum, for Rumi, what is to be slaughtered is the illusions: the illusion that one is independent of the Creator, that the world is a resting place rather than a sign pointing to God, that things happen haphazardly and that we are victims of random forces of history and nature.

In the last section of this essay, we shall look at this understanding of “active” submission to God as it plays out in the pilgrimage rituals associated with the binding story.

PERFORMANCE AS INTERPRETATION: HAJJ AND ABRAHAM’S SACRIFICE

Hajj is one of the major practices of Islam where many believers from all over the world come to Mecca annually and worship together during the pilgrimage season, which lasts for around five days. At the heart of hajj lies the notion of surrender to the one and only God, and the rituals of hajj reenact the Abraham story as a commemoration of and recommitment to such surrender to God.

According to the Muslim tradition, hajj is a religious call that is to be answered by each and every adult Muslim (if she or he is financially and physically able) once in a lifetime. The rites that are undertaken during the stay in Mecca, outlined by the Qur’an and Muhammad’s example, are crucially linked to Abraham. For the Kaaba, the ancient temple at the heart of Mecca, is believed to be the first temple to be dedicated to the worship of one God. There are traditions that narrate that Adam first raised it, and then Abraham and his son Ishmael re-erected it. The Qur’an skips much of the narrative detail as usual, and highlights Abraham and Ishmael’s prayer:

And when Abraham and Ishmael were raising the foundations of the Temple, [they prayed:] “O Our Sustainer! Accept Thou this from us: for verily, Thou alone are all-hearing, all-knowing! O Our Sustainer! Make us surrender ourselves unto Thee, make out of our offspring a community that shall surrender itself unto Thee, and show us our ways of worship, and accept our repentance: for, verily, Thou alone art the Acceptor of Repentance, the Dispenser of Grace!” (Q. 2:127)⁴⁶

46. Here, I used Muhammad Asad’s translation so as to bring forth the “surrender” emphasis in the verse (cf. Abdel Haleem who translated the same term *muslimīn* less literally, as “devoted.”) Asad, *Message of the Qur’an*, 688.

Indeed, according to the Qur'an, Abraham is the "Muslim" (lit., "the one who surrenders") par excellence (Q. 22:78), and he is the one who also instituted the pilgrimage (Q. 22:26–28).

An often repeated collective chant throughout the pilgrimage is "Here I am Lord, Here I am, there is no god except You," which emphasizes the oneness of God and the act of answering to divine call. Two other important rituals in the hajj directly connect with the story of sacrifice, and thus offer a performative interpretation of the story of Abraham's sacrifice. The first is the ritual stoning of Satan, which consists of throwing small pebbles at three different stone pillars at Mina. The ritual represents renunciation of all evil and the believer's resolve to resist Satan's temptations. This ritual is traditionally linked with Abraham's and his family's temptation by Satan, when Abraham decided to sacrifice his son as an act of surrender to God.

The second rite of the hajj that connects with the sacrifice story is the one that concludes the hajj, which is the sacrifice of a sheep, ram, or a similar animal. The Muslim tradition has understood this ritual as a commemoration of Abraham's sacrifice of the ram as a "ransom" for his son (see Q. 37:107). The day of sacrifice in hajj constitutes the annual Festival of Sacrifice, *Eid al Adha*, which is celebrated not only by those who are in Mecca for hajj but also by Muslims worldwide. The Qur'anic command regarding animal sacrifice repeatedly highlights the concept of the oneness of God, and submission to him and gratitude for blessings (Q. 22:34ff.). In these passages, submission is glossed also in terms of one's attitude to life, and perhaps Rumi's emphasis on active submission was inspired by these:

Your God is the One and Only God: hence, surrender yourselves unto Him. And give thou the glad tiding [of God's acceptance] unto all who are humble—all whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned, and all who patiently bear whatever ill befalls them, and all who are constant in prayer and spend on others out of what We provide for them as sustenance. (Q. 22:34–35).⁴⁷

The cattle is to be sacrificed by declaring God's name on it, and the meat is eaten and also distributed to the poor and the neighbors (Q. 22:36). Since the number of pilgrims has increased significantly over the centuries, reaching to over two millions, today during hajj season refrigerated planes fly out of Saudi Arabia to Africa in order to distribute the meat to the needy.⁴⁸ It is noteworthy

47. Asad, *Message of the Qur'an* 511 (italics added).

48. Sherwood, "Binding–Unbinding," 844.

that the Qur'an explicitly notes the symbolic value of the sacrifice: "It is neither their meat nor their blood that reaches God but your piety" (Q. 22:36). Thus the annual sacrifice ritual brings out the symbolic implication of the story: just as Abraham was not meant to sacrifice his son, the meat of the sacrificed animal is not meant to reach God. Rather, it is Abraham's and his son's surrender as well as the common believer's attitude toward God that matters.

Ali Shariati (1933–1977), an influential Muslim intellectual of the modern era, offers reflections on pilgrimage rites in this vein. Shariati sought to recover the importance of *tawhid*, the oneness of God, in contemporary Muslim life, which he considered to be obscured under contemporary religious establishment as well as unfair distribution of wealth. He explains how each step of pilgrimage rituals as prepares the pilgrim for a deeper connection with the One. For instance, when the pilgrim reaches Kaaba, the cubic structure that is empty inside, she realizes that Kaaba itself is not the aim itself but a signpost; the real goal is God.⁴⁹

According to Shariati, the act of sacrifice in hajj is also a performative reiteration of the oneness of God. It is to affirm that nothing else is worthy of worship, and all idols are to be discarded. For him, Abraham's test of sacrificing his son is a test that is most touching, challenging, and most profound. The divine command to sacrifice Ishmael was meant to elevate Abraham to the full freedom of worship of God alone.⁵⁰ Shariati imagines and dwells on Abraham's pain at length. Abraham must have felt a deep pain, "beyond tolerance or imagination! Ibrahim [Abraham], the most humble servant of God and the famous rebel of human history, started to shake as if he were falling apart and the great invincible of history was breaking to pieces."⁵¹ This was an internal battle for Abraham: he had to choose between God and Ishmael, between serving his instincts and God.⁵² Thus, in reenacting the sacrifice, the pilgrim must keep this awareness of personal idols in mind:

Who is your Ismail [Ishmael]—Your position? Your honor? Profession? Money? House? Farm? Car? Love? Family? Knowledge? Social class? Art? Dress? Name? Your life? Your youth? Your beauty . . . ? How do I know? But you know it yourself whoever and whatever, *you should have brought it with you* to sacrifice here. . . .⁵³

49. Ali Shariati, *Hajj*, (USA: Filinc, 1978), 21–22.

50. *Ibid.*, 95.

51. *Ibid.*, 86.

52. *Ibid.*, 86.

53. *Ibid.*, 84 (italics added).

Shariati goes on to give clues to help discover one's Ishmael—or rather, an idolized attachment to your Ishmael: anything that stands between you and an honest recognition of truth, anything that makes you escape your responsibilities, and “whatever causes you to rationalize for the sake of convenience.”⁵⁴ The act of submission is, again, interpreted as an active response; it is to be willing to attend to truth and take responsibility, even if it is inconvenient to the ego.

Thus, for Shariati, the son before the sacrifice attempt represents that which the believer idolizes other than the One.⁵⁵ The sacrifice is there to abolish such idolatry, and the son after the sacrifice is the son received as a gift of God, and not as an alternative to God. It is thus very meaningful for Shariati that Ishmael does not get hurt at all in the process: for the target was not him per se, but an idolized attachment to him.⁵⁶ Shariati basks in the ending of the story as well as the pilgrimage rite of sacrifice:

A lesson was taught by the Almighty God—from now on there would be *no more sacrifice* of man for God. . . In Ibrahim's religion, sheep are sacrificed and not man! . . . This is Ibrahim's faith (Islam) and not the story of bloodthirsty gods, masochists or human torturers. It is a story of man's perfection and his freedom from selfishness and animalistic desires. . . . This is what Almighty God requested at the end of this greatest human tragedy—to sacrifice a sheep to feed a few hungry people.⁵⁷

To be sure, the pilgrim, unlike Abraham, knows the end of the story: that Ishmael will not be hurt and it is a ram that is sacrificed. This foreknowledge both nuances and complicates the reenactment. It nuances in that the fact that Ishmael does not get sacrificed shows that the point is about changing how one *relates* to the “things” (including to one's spouse, child, possessions, and oneself) rather than destroying the things out there. Yet, it also makes the enactment of the story complicated, for one may think that nothing really changes, Abraham and Ishmael remain the same: they are alive before and after the sacrifice. Thus, Shariati cautions the pilgrim to be receptive to a genuine cleansing of his soul from idolatry: “do not choose the sheep (ransom) yourself; let the Almighty help and present it to you as a gift.” That is, in the act of sacrificing the animal,

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid., 95.

56. Ibid., 97.

57. Ibid., (italics added).

the pilgrim should genuinely intend to give up his idols without any bargain, and beware of doing the sacrifice as an end in itself. A sacrifice of a sheep is meaningful only if it replaces your idolized attachment to Ishmael, otherwise sacrificing the animal is pure “butchery”!⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

In her comparative study of the reception of Abraham’s “near-sacrifice” of his son in three Abrahamic traditions, Sherwood argues that there is a scary “parenthetical qualification” that haunts the biblical command not to kill: “Thou shalt not kill a human being (although you should be prepared to offer a family member as a burnt offering if God tells you to.)”⁵⁹ She shows how each tradition both sensed and resisted that qualification in compelling ways. She also suggests how the Qur’anic story seems to ease the tension by omitting much of the graphic physical detail, so that “there is no fire, no knife, no firewood” mentioned. Moreover, the son’s consent to the sacrifice in the Qur’anic account “effectively pours salve on the major ethical wound in the biblical narrative.”⁶⁰ Moreover, the text announces that this was “*clearly*” a test, and Abraham’s submission is presented in this Qur’anic chapter as part of a “long chain of surrender that stretches through Noah, Moses and Aaron, Elijah (Ilyas), Lot and Jonah.”⁶¹

This essay further illustrated how Muslim interpreters across the ages read the story as suggesting something completely different from doing violence to your innocent beloved. As we have seen, the narrative detailing and embellishment of the Qur’anic story acknowledged the counter-intuitiveness of the divine command. The theological discussions about whether sacrifice of the son was indeed a divine command further assured that the story was not meant to disrupt human reasoning, common sense, and the sacred law. Razi insisted that it was a divine command, but one that was not meant to be carried out, while his opponents insisted that the sacrifice of the son was not part of God’s command to Abraham at all. Furthermore, Ibn Hazm clearly noted how the same action under any other circumstance would be an act of extreme insanity or cruelty. All of these are ways in which the tradition simply rejected the idea that one should be prepared to act insane for God’s sake. Instead, the story was to be read as calling to a different type of praxis.

58. Ibid., 98.

59. Sherwood, “Binding–Unbinding,” 843.

60. Ibid., 842.

61. Ibid., 841.

Indeed, among the best interpreters of the sacrifice story in the Muslim tradition have been the ones who focused on self-formation. For they read it as potentially having a meaningful implication for *anyone*. Theirs was also the most consistent within the Qur'anic framework in that the Qur'an explicitly presents prophets as exemplary models. Thus, Ibn 'Arabi noted how Abraham's attempt at interpreting the dream is a "bridge" to be crossed by each reader. Abraham's test teaches us a lesson in the interpretation of signs in life's journey to God. Ibn 'Arabi affirmed the role of reason in discerning the correct implications of images and inspirations that one receives, and also qualified his reference to reason by noting that it should be enlightened by a proper vision of "Reality."

Similarly, Rumi took the story as applying to each human being in her life journey. He called the reader to be an Ishmael, and to be open to receive God's mercy and wisdom even in the most painful circumstances. Becoming an Ishmael before Abraham's knife is every believer's call: anyone who is willing can unconditionally surrender to the King of Love, and be liberated from being a victim of the random forces of nature, ego, and history. What is to be slaughtered is the attitude of unconsciousness, of forgetting who the Lord is and that all that comes from the Lord is meaningful.

Finally, annual pilgrimage offers a performative communal reading of the story. The pilgrims commemorate Abraham's story by confronting Satan in stoning ritual and through animal sacrifice. The sacrifice meat is distributed to the poor, and it is clear that just as Abraham was not meant to sacrifice his son, the meat of the sacrificed animal is not meant to reach God. What is meant in this performance, as Shariati noted, is liberation from worshipping idols: the act of sacrifice is an exercise of freedom from idolatrous relationships. If Rumi focused on how to act like Abraham's son, Shariati focused on how to act like Abraham: to receive our Ishmaels and Isaacs, our beloveds—including our own selves—as gifts from God, and face our responsibility honestly even at the face of convenient excuses.

To my mind, the reception of the sacrifice story in the Muslim tradition—not unlike Christian and Jewish traditions—is an example of how the Qur'anic text, or more broadly a scriptural text, may have a deeper meaning than what may first meet the eye. A text that seems so strange and apparently so vulnerable to misunderstanding may in fact be disclosing a most valuable lesson for the reader. This does not mean that the texts can never be abused, but it strongly suggests that we should not readily dismiss apparently strange stories in sacred scriptures—lest we are deprived of profound messages dressed in provocative garb.

